

A QUIETER KIND OF PARK

Pammel State Park, one of Iowa's oldest, hits all the high notes—backbone trail, river ford, yurts—while maintaining a peaceful river vibe.





OPPOSITE: The new Middle River Water Trail passes several Madison County parks and famous covered bridges. Below: angler Harold Wilson of Colfax casts for fish below the river ford at Pammel State Park, shown at right. The ford is full of fish, and it's just plain fun to drive across. **RIGHT:** County Conservation Board Director Jim Liechty's vigilance over the river ensures its recreational value for travelers who can sense its cared-for feeling.



There is a difference between a lake area and a river park. Lake destinations exude energy. The motorized crowd buzzes about, and the noise can go on all night, long after the last boat has docked, but the cooler isn't yet empty.

A river park is a quieter thing. Its energy burbles and flows like the water that lends the area its finest feature.

Pammel State Park is just such a place. Located an hour southwest of Des Moines just outside Winterset, this 350-acre park dedicated in 1930 has the slow-flowing Middle River as its centerpiece. It's surrounded by natural woodland that peaks with a limestone ridge of a backbone, with ancient oak trees and some of the only yurt lodging in Iowa.

A RIDE ON THE RIVER

Though spare of build, County Conservation Board Director Jim Liechty has the sure, strong stroke of someone who paddles a lot. The faint smile beneath his bucket cap confirms it: the Middle River is his happy place.

"The river is the draw in this park. The quiet," says Liechty, adjusting gold-rimmed spectacles on his tanned

face. "Without having a lake and boating recreation features, this park attracts a different type of clientele."

Liechty trolls the Middle River a few times a week. An active local river group lends a hand, too. Madison County River Alliance (MCRA) promotes recreation and water quality needs of the many waterways in Madison County. Combined, their vigilance gives the Middle River a cared-for feeling. It's clean, as rivers go. Regular testing, says Liechty, shows low phosphorus and nitrates, even though this is farm country.

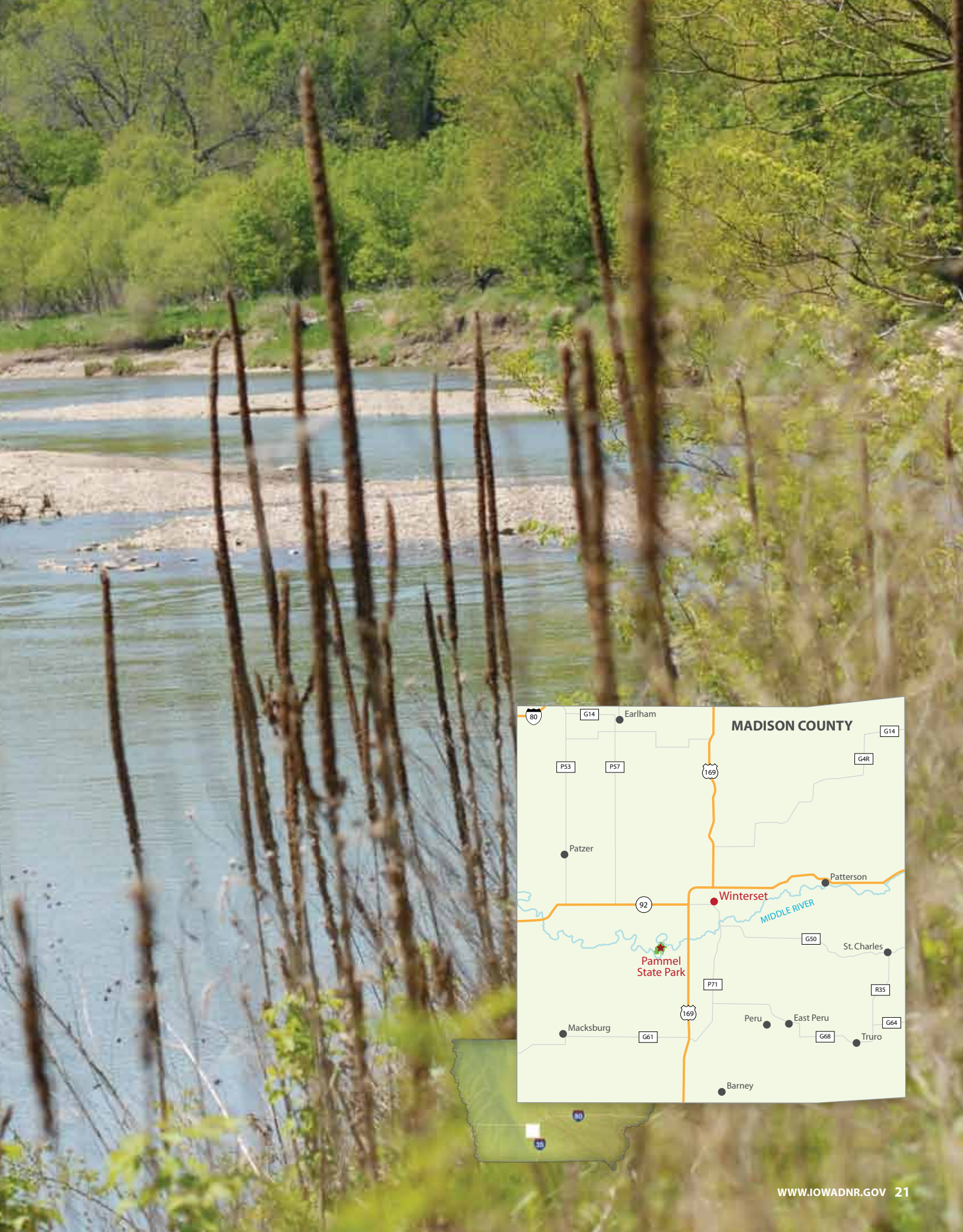
In terms of recreation, it's accessible, too. The put-ins every 7 or 8 miles are easy and new—just a gentle slide into the water in most places. It averages 24 inches deep with some deeper holes throughout, and about 6 inches at its shallow points. Hawks ride the thermals above. The channel is narrow and meandering, and that provides a challenge. It's lazy in midsummer, rowdier in spring. Rock walls enclose the paddler in sections, low bluffs above mud so undisturbed it looks like concrete.

It's got an official moniker now, too: the Middle River Water Trail opened in October 2011, spanning the several

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Middle River is Pammel State Park's centerpiece. "One of the things I like about this river is that it's not necessarily deep," says Jim Liechty. "It challenges you to be a good canoeist, to find a channel." With work from a local river alliance, the water is clean, as rivers go. Regular testing, says Liechty, shows low phosphorus and nitrates, even though this is farm country. In terms of recreation, it's accessible, with a new and well-marked water trail. With this 45-mile stretch, Iowa has nearly 900 miles of designated water trails and 600 miles under development.





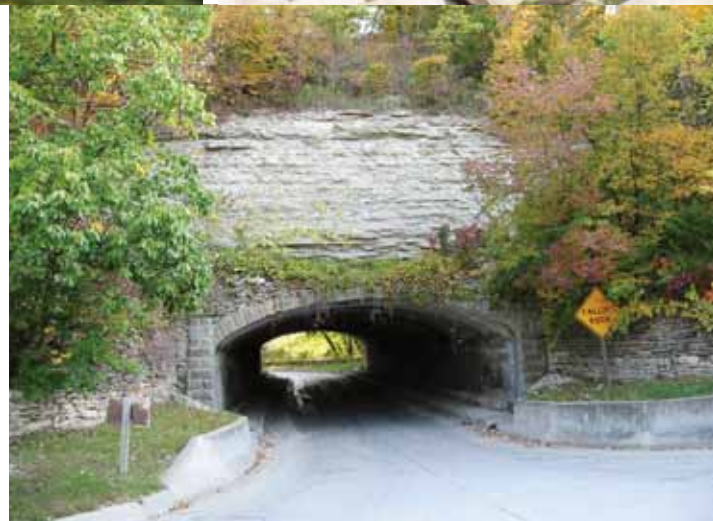
Lost In Iowa



Come spring, flathead catfish stack up below the river ford at Pammel Park as angler Steve Cooper of Winterset attests with a man-sized catch. **RIGHT:** Harmon Tunnel was dug in 1858 to divert river water to power a sawmill and grist mill. An old burr, or grinder, from the mill is set in stone nearby. After the mill closed, workers widened the tunnel in 1925 to offer vehicles easy access to the rest of the park. It remains Iowa's only highway tunnel. **BELOW:** The Roseman Bridge access is along the 45-mile Middle River water trail, which offers moderately challenging paddling with scenic chutes and ledges.

What was the Veterans Conservation Corps?

In 1933, due to protests from veterans hit hard during the Great Depression, President Roosevelt added veteran companies to the Civilian Conservation Corps, enrolling 25,000 veterans of the Spanish-American War and World War I. Nearly 250,000 veterans served in the Corps, completing public works projects like those of the CCC. This "Bonus Army" paved the way for the G.I. Bill of Rights. Some states still use a VCC for natural resource projects. One of the missions is to provide volunteer opportunities on natural resources projects.



parks and scenic points in Madison County (passing a few of those famous bridges).

LIVING HISTORY

Because of the river, there is the ford.

The Middle River Ford is one of Iowa's largest vehicle crossings. But no matter what size the ford, it's just plain cool to drive across a body of water. Maybe it's our leftover pioneer instinct, or just the big awesome splash it makes.

Below the chutes of the ford, beyond the rip-rap, lurk some of the biggest catfish you'll ever catch. We're talking 40 to 50 pound flatheads in mid-May to mid-June, and stringers full of 15 pounders. A little chub, a little cut bait, and you can fill your freezer for months.

"It's beautiful fishing down here," says angler Mike Wren. He's shirtless and carefree, eased back in a lawn chair with a camouflage do-rag protecting his head.

"You know what's neat about this place? You can have a bunch of kids swimming out here and guys catching fish right next to them. It's unreal, man."

It's the flatheads that bring him here each spring. "They're monsters," Wren laughs. "They take your bait quick—they love it live, like sunfish or chubs—but they'll eat about anything. If you're patient, and you get here on the right day at the right time, you'll have the time of your life."

Beyond the ford is Harmon Tunnel, the only highway tunnel in Iowa, hand-dug directly into the base of a limestone backbone where the park peaks above. You can find that limestone backbone among the park's five miles of trails—it's a faint one beyond the Backbone Shelter, constructed in the 1930s by Depression-era conservation corps. The wide yard in front of the shelter was once used

for weekend picnic visitors in old times. It's home to some of the oldest oak and walnut stands in the state.

Madison County is unique for the many river systems running through it—the North River and its North Branch, Middle River, Jones Creek, Clanton Creek, Cedar Creek—and if you stand on that backbone when the trees are bare, you can see the Middle River flowing in all four directions from a single vantage point.

HISTORY AND ECOLOGY

Like many great parks, the area served as home for encampments of New Deal-era citizen work groups known as the Civilian Conservation Corps. But the area was also base for a special branch of that group, the Veterans Conservation Corps (*see sidebar*). Veterans helped build this park and its limestone structures, such as the historic picnic lodge with monolithic oak logs harvested on site.

Dean Schantz of the Madison County Conservation Board has lived near the park for more than two decades. His property once housed the VCC camp, with the old freestanding fireplace in his front yard marking where the main lodge stood. In his gardens, the footings of the old building lie buried under wild lilies.

"I'm still finding things," he chuckles, noting the remains of fairly lush officers' quarters in his timber. "I'll always be finding things."

Area resident Dean Schantz birds near the park, a popular flyway. His property once housed the Veterans Conservation Corps, where the VCC camp fireplace ruins still remain. Schantz and others flock to the park and the Makoke Birding Trail, which passes through Madison County. The name means "bird" or "owl" in Ioway. Walking trails along the river during early May migration offers the widest variety of birding opportunities.







The lodge's large limestone fireplace warms reunions, weddings and other large gatherings, including one family who returns each year for Thanksgiving. Built in the 1920s, Civilian Conservation Corps workers used oak logs harvested on-site and native stone created by a carboniferous sea that was here millions of years ago.

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He makes a lot of discoveries of the avian type, too. With all its timber and waterways, the park area is fertile birding ground. The Makoke Birding Trail passes through the park (the name means “bird” or “owl” in Ioway; www.iowabirds.org/places/documents/Makoke_Trail.pdf).

Schantz ticks off a list of the birds that he’s seen. “American redstart, scarlet tanager, neotropical migrants in May, the occasional eagle and pelican,” he says. “I had a yellow warbler three days ago.”

It’s easiest to catch sight of the rare birds in Pammel State Park in spring. Madison County also has a small population of timber rattlesnakes—they’re nocturnal. To get the full array of animal action here, overnighing is best. That’s where the park hosts another rarity: campers can stay in a tent or RV, but the on-site yurts are particularly fun.

A yurt is somewhere between cabin and tent—sans the mouse or mildew smells—with the softness of canvas walls, the warmth of structure, the convenience of electricity, a softer footprint than an RV. Pammel’s are air-conditioned and heated, with kitchenettes and a fridge. An exterior deck holds a grill with a fire ring and water hydrant nearby (you’ll have to walk a short distance to the full-service bath house).

The yurts sleep eight with bunks, and somehow feel more connected to the woods they sit near. You can still hear the owl hooting in the tree, the pack of coonhounds baying all night at the neighboring property. It’s simple and spare. Open.

Like the river, like the birds, like driving across that ford to get to the giant catfish, it’s another of Pammel State Park’s simple pleasures.

PARK INFORMATION:

Pammel Park is located 4 miles southwest of Winterset. 2273 Clark Tower Road, Winterset, IA 50273. GPS Coordinates (UTM @ park entrance): X:410250 Y:4572325, UTM Zone 15. www.madisoncountyparks.org

YURT RENTAL:

- \$50 per night (two-night minimum on weekends, 3 to 4 night minimum on holidays and Covered Bridge Festival). Weekly rate: \$325.
- Standard Iowa camping rates apply for 36 modern campsites with electrical and water hookups, as well as five elevated tent-only sites.

IF YOU GO:

- **Ben Franklin:** A particularly good one on town square. **515-462-2062.**
- **B. Shannon Designs:** Original art and artisan-made jewelry on town square. **515-462-6749.**
- **Madison County Historical Society:** A 14-building complex on 18 acres, including a train depot, old church, mansion, mercantile, stone barn and more. **515-462-2134.**
- **Mi Pueblito:** Good Mexican food on town square. **515-462-1640.**
- **Espresso Yourself:** Get a hot coffee and baked treats on town square. **515-462-5962.**



Hand-made canoes

Retired veterinarian Bob LaFollett lives on a small in-town farm on the outskirts of Winterset, across the road from the county fairgrounds. In his barn he handcrafts canoes and kayaks, borrowing techniques from old Native American styles to meld with modern technology. He uses poplar wood, fiberglass fabric and epoxy for standards such as a 16-foot Prospector and a camp canoe.

Prices average about \$100 per foot, plus materials. Canoe Builders, Ltd. **515-462-2606** for inquiries.





TOP: Comfortable yurt cabins sleep up to eight and feature heating and cooling and kitchenettes, decks, grills and fire rings. **LEFT:** Park naturalist Jessica Lancial operates the nature center (right), and introduces children to the native amphibians and reptiles that are under pressure from pollution, climate change and habitat loss. **FACING:** Zadie Hoff uses a GPS to find hidden geocaches. It's like a nature hide-and-seek that enthralls kids.